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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

By HENRY WETHERBEE HENSHAW

(Continued from page 171)

JOIN THE WHEELER SURVEY IN UTAH

IN JULY, 1872, this chance knowledge, however acquired, bore fruit in a telegram from Professor Baird, asking if I would go to Utah as natural history collector on the Wheeler Expedition. Knowing nothing of the expedition or of its objects, I telegraphed for further information, and received it in the shape of the following message: "Report immediately at Salt Lake City; pay transportation and take receipts". My inductive powers not being equal to the task of extracting much information from this somewhat brief message, I decided to go to Salt Lake and find out for myself what was wanted of me, a decision not difficult to understand by any young fellow who has read Lewis and Clark and Captain Bonneville and to whom the Great Plains, the Buffalo, and the Indians were words to conjure with. So I "paid transportation, took receipts", and in a few days found myself in Salt Lake City, face to face with Lieut. Geo. M. Wheeler, who, to no small extent, was to be master of my fate for the next decade.

Salt Lake City was then but a village compared to what it is now, and the Survey party was camped a mile or two out of the town on the side of one of its grass-bordered streets, through many of which streams of beautifully clear water ran, flanked by pasture land. The country round about being open furnished little of interest to the naturalist. Accordingly, after a few days preparation, on July 22, Doctor H. C. Yarrow, in charge of the Natural History work, and myself, duly armed and equipped, left for Provo, some fifty miles to the south, which, owing to its proximity to Utah Lake on one side and to the mountain canyons on the other, and to its orchards and cultivated fields, proved very good collecting ground. Here we spent several weeks before the regular field parties assembled.

I was greatly surprised to hear in the pastures round Provo the familiar song of the Bobolink, which up to that time I had supposed to be an exclusively eastern bird. A small colony, however, had established itself in this far western outpost, as since it has done elsewhere in the western states.

I may here note as a curious coincidence that at the time I was collecting birds round Provo, E. W. Nelson, then quite unknown to me, was also collecting birds a few miles to the north, a fact I have just become aware of. He had been in Wyoming assisting Prof. E. D. Cope in his search for fossils, and, having parted with that brilliant scientist, had made his way to Salt Lake City, near which he was collecting birds on his own initiative. Subsequently, a short account of his collections and observations near Salt Lake City, from July 27 to August 8, 1872, appeared in the Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History (xvii, 1875).

METHODS OF FIELD WORK

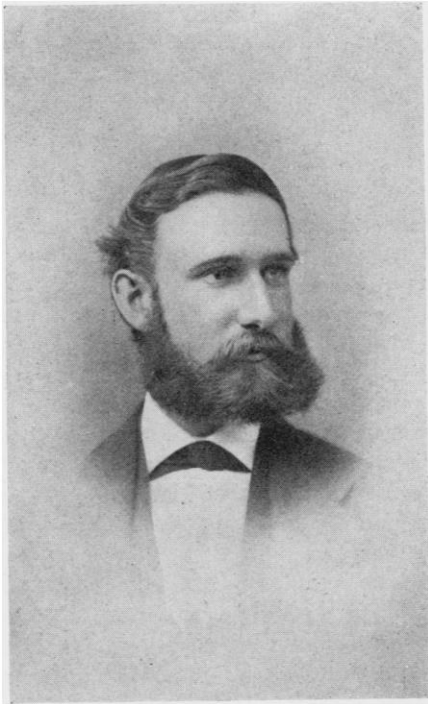


Fig. 35. HENRY WETHERBEE HENSHAW
IN 1873.

Space does not permit giving full details of our work in Utah, which included, besides the collecting of birds, collecting in several other branches of natural history, as mammals, fish, reptiles, insects and even plants. Since the methods of work practised the first season differed a little from those in vogue later they may be briefly described, so as to afford an idea of the circumstances and difficulties that beset the path of the government collector nearly fifty years ago.

Be it understood, then, that the essential work of the Wheeler Survey, as of its predecessors in the War Department, was geographic, and consisted of the making of reconnaissance maps of the far west, much of which, even at that late date, was uninhabited and still very imperfectly known, especially the mountain regions. The collection of natural history specimens formed a very small part of the work of the several field parties, and naturally was wholly subordinate to the main purpose of the Survey.

PERSONNEL OF THE FIELD PARTIES

Each of the field parties was in charge of an army officer, usually a recent graduate of West Point, and consisted of one or more topographers, an assistant who had charge of an odometer (which was attached to a large wheel drawn by a mule), a geologist, a naturalist (not every party had either), a number of packers according to the size of the mule train, and one or more cooks, according to the size of the party. The number of parties varied with each season, but was from five to ten, including perhaps fifty individuals, and their fields of operation often were widely separated.

The naturalists and the geologists were assigned to one party or another, according to the opportunities for work offered by the several lines of travel. Thus each party was made up of from five to ten or more individuals according to circumstances. Though every effort was made to strip the personal belongings and camp equipage down to actual necessities, the impedimenta were not small, and necessitated for each party a mule train of from six to fifteen or twenty animals.

THE PACKERS

Most of the packers were roustabouts picked up here and there more or less at random, for in those days men skilled in that kind of work were rare and hard to find. Among them were not a few of the typical "bad men of the west" who have more recently been introduced into polite society through the medium of the novel and the movie. Bad some of them certainly were, but as a rule I found them very communicative and entertaining as comrades of the trail, and daily communication with them soon taught me that, however bad they were, each and all of them had not a few redeeming traits. First and last I received many kindnesses at their hands. Theirs was the laborious task each morning of rounding up the mule herd—not always an easy matter, especially when, owing to lack of grass or water, the herd had taken a notion to retrace its steps to the last camp, often fifteen or twenty miles away. Their duty, too, it was to assemble and tie into bundles the camp impedimenta, and then by means of the famed "diamond hitch" fasten the boxes and bundles to the aparejos (large padded saddles), which had been securely cinched on the unwilling mules. As many of the packages weighed upwards of a hundred pounds apiece, the job of lifting them into place and securing them there required no mean degree of strength, skill, and patience. Three hundred pounds was not an uncommon load for a stout mule, and for a limited time on good roads a mule may carry as much as four hundred pounds. The packers travelled constantly with the train, not only to protect it, but to adjust and tighten the packs from time to time as needed. In rough country or rainy weather, this was not seldom, and not infrequently a pack animal was upset, or crowded off a mountain trail, to roll down a hundred feet or so into the stream below, when the packers had to plunge into the water, rescue the drowning animal and its pack, and replace the load. Polished manners and scholarly attainments were foreign to the packer's calling, and usually they lacked the gift of eloquent speech, but when things went wrong with the train, and stubborn mules needed rebuke, their outbursts of profane imaginings amounted to real eloquence.

THE AMERICAN MULE

This part of my theme would be incomplete did I not add a word on the subject of the American Mule—an animal, which, to my mind, has never received full justice. Overlooking the bar sinister which attaches to his birth, and judging him in a friendly and not a hostile spirit, his native virtues are many, his faults few, and those chiefly due to bad treatment. Stripes and blows he never forgets and rarely forgives, and, as he has a good memory, he sometimes waits long for an opportunity to retaliate. That he is stubborn cannot be denied, but he is also patient and long suffering, and such is his endurance that he survives and even prospers under circumstances, such as lack of food and water, which would quickly prove fatal to his nobler(?) and more

highly organized relative, the horse. Strong and enduring, he is a tower of strength on the dizzy mountain trail and in the parched desert. He soon comes to recognize the kind touch and decent treatment of the master, and to kindness and consideration he quickly responds. A good riding mule, and there are many such, is the easiest riding animal in the world. As mules carried me during my explorations in the far west many thousands of miles I raise my voice in praise of this much misunderstood and much underestimated animal. May his days in the land be long and prosperous, and in due time may he come into his own.

THE CAMP COOK

Last but not least in importance in our field personnel was the cook. Whatsoever he chanced to be as man, upon his ability as a cook depended to no small degree the health and comfort of the party. Much rested upon his skill, but perhaps more upon his patience and zeal. To cook a savory meal on a modern gas range, with all the conveniences at hand, is not so difficult; but to achieve this feat in the open air, on a windy day, often under a rainy sky, with bits of brushwood for fuel, and a horde of hungry men demanding something to eat, is given only to the elect and to few of them. I hold in grateful memory a number of such cooks whose triumphs over the trials and tribulations that beset their calling entitle them to golden crowns. Some of them are still alive, and I trust that these few words of appreciation may meet their eyes; while in grateful remembrance of those who have gone before I add peace to their ashes.

INDIANS IN THE FAR WEST

In Utah, in 1872, there had been trouble, with some bloodshed, between the Mormons and the Paiutes. Later, in Arizona, the Apaches were restless, and hence in the early days of the expedition it was thought necessary to attach to each of our parties a small escort of soldiers. As however, Lieut. Wheeler took the precaution to call the Chiefs together, have a talk with them, explain the peaceful objects of the Survey, and, perhaps wiser still, to make them presents of blankets and other objects of moment in their eyes, our escort was never called upon to use their arms in our behalf, though doubtless their presence was not without moral effect on our red brothers.

The suspected presence of Indians near us, however, interfered somewhat with our comfort and sense of safety, more especially as in 1872 the party in the mountains to which I was attached observed signal smokes near our line day by day and signal fires at night. These seemed to signify that the Indians were keeping tab on our movements, and so alarmed our Mormon guide that he refused to accompany us farther into the mountains, and left Lieut. Wheeler to guide the party himself, which he proved fully competent to do. Once, only, during the term of my service with the Survey did I hear the whistle of a hostile bullet. This was on the trip just mentioned when one morning I was peacefully collecting in a brushy canyon a mile or more from camp, when a shot was fired from the brush the other side of the ravine. Interpreting this as a mild request to go no farther in that particular direction, I pursued my later investigations nearer camp.

I may add here that all the Indians I ever saw shoot, or that I hunted with, were poor shots; as, indeed, was but natural, since the Indian's skill in stalking game was so great as usually to insure a dead shot at close range. Moreover, ammunition was so scarce with them, as a rule, that they could not

afford to practise with a rifle, and rarely took any chances with long shots at game. The eyes of the Indian for out-of-door objects are proverbially sharp, as I had reason to discover at Camp Apache. When out collecting birds my footsteps were frequently tagged by one or more lads from the Indian camp hard by, and the skill displayed by them in detecting birds in the thick brush and among the leafy tree tops put me fairly to shame, and incidentally earned their well merited contempt for the white man's blindness.

LIFE IN THE OPEN

Lieut. Wheeler early learned that to do good work the men must be well fed and well supplied with bedding, and no one had just cause of complaint in these respects. Everybody slept on the ground under the open sky, and, given youth and health, no one need desire a more luxurious couch. For several years the saddle formed my pillow; but it was by no means so comfortable as a small rubber inflatable pillow which I later adopted. True, even in the dry climate of the west it sometimes rained, but a large piece of canvas, ten by twelve, or thereabouts, furnished an adequate shelter during any ordinary downpour, as well as a protection from dust and rain for the roll of bedding during the day's march. To the chief of each party was usually assigned a tent, but to no other, save the naturalist, since he was compelled often to work on his specimens by candle light, sometimes even into the wee small hours.

The length of the day's march depended upon many circumstances, especially the presence of wood, water, and grass, but averaged somewhere between twelve and twenty-five miles. We were awakened early, and frequently had breakfasted and were in the saddle by six or before. The members of the party then scattered, each to his own work, except in an Indian country, while the train, headed by the bell mare, which usually was led by the cook, followed a designated route till about four or five in the afternoon, when camp was made, always provided water, wood, and grass had been found by that time. The first was absolutely necessary, except in dire necessity when a keg or two of water, which we usually carried in a desert country, enabled a dry camp to be made; the second was important, though we usually had a reserve supply of barley for the mules in case of need, and the third very desirable.

When wood was scarce the cook was wont to look to the other members of the party for assistance, and he rarely looked in vain, for by late afternoon the several members, after a light luncheon carried in the pocket, always seemed to be in a state closely verging on starvation. By dusk, or a little before, all the men were in camp, and dinner was served on a sheet of canvas spread on the ground. Later this rather primitive arrangement was replaced by a table made of the top of two mess chests which greatly added to our comfort, especially in rainy weather.

The rations supplied by the U. S. commissary were abundant and of sufficient variety to keep the men in abounding good health. The naturalist, with a trusty shotgun always by his side and an abundance of ammunition, was always a welcome addition to any party, and in those days, when every mountain stream was full of hungry trout, and turkeys, geese, grouse, sage-hens, rabbits, and other small game abounded in many localities, to say nothing of deer, his contributions to the mess were neither small nor unimportant.

(To be continued)